Karl Nesic

The call of the void

The sequel to the pamphlet *Whither the world* on the changing nature of today's 'post-Fordist' capitalism, this pamphlet looks at the connections between the current wars, financial crises and class struggle.

Nesic writes: "The present situation reminds us that capitalism is not a framework within which class struggle takes place, but *is* itself class struggle."

Is there anything common between the US-British invasion of Iraq, the American rule over Afghan disorder, the implosion of Argentina in 2001-2002, a mass resurging protest that claims to be anti-capitalist, and the downfall of what was yesterday heralded as the coming of a new technological era ?

This common factor is certainly not the growth of a hyperpower, nor the drive of a possible reformist alternative, even less a crisis that would bring down the whole system.

The present situation reminds us that capitalism is not a framework within which class struggle takes place, but *is* itself class struggle.

GOING BACK TO BASICS, BUT NOT QUITE THE EXPECTED ONES

The world is based on the exchange of labour for money, and a lot more so in 2003 than in 1848. This exchange is ruled by the bourgeoisie or capitalist class. It's normal the bourgeois should profit from it, but let's not turn causality upside down: it's his bourgeois function that makes him rich, and he only keeps this function as long as he accumulates capital and organizes its reproduction on an enlarged scale. The possibility of such an accumulation comes from exploiting labour power, the only commodity owned by the proletarians, whose function is to increase value, and to try and sell this commodity as best they can.

Neither function is fulfilled by an addition of rootless individuals. Family and community ties exist on both sides, and each of the two fundamental groups reproduces itself as a group from one generation to the next. Neither is closed or impermeable but each is fairly homogenous. In each group, members intermarry, socialize together, and develop some form of collective identity. The constituents and contours of classes vary, quite a few members are of course upwardly or downwardly mobile, but the invariant remains. Just

because it can be difficult to decide who belongs or doesn't belong to a class, it does not mean that classes are abstractions. Even if all present bourgeois children became proles in twenty years, and all the bourgeois in twenty years were born working class, "class analysis" would still be valid. We're not talking about personnel, but about structure. The Victorian mill-owner differed as much from Henry Ford or Bill Gates, as the 1840 proletarianized craftsman differed from the 1930 metalworker or the 2003 computer assembler. Sociology is always better at emphasizing variants than identifying structures.

Stating that capital is class struggle does not imply that latent or open conflict happens all the time. It only means that capital and wage labour have to live as forced partners and opponents. Fighters rarely fight each other to death. Struggle usually means accepting the setting and scope of the struggle. Capital needs wage labour. As long as this system carries on, wage labour needs capital too. Class confrontation exists because there are classes with opposed interests. Class collaboration exists because they depend on each other.

Capital is a social relationship, and involves the two fundamental classes that compose it and keep it going on; so, its evolution can't have one single cause. Let's not

wonder if it's a capitalist crisis that forces the proletarians to react; or if it's the resistance or revolt of the wage earners that causes such a crisis. Speaking of "class struggle" has no positive or normative sense in itself. It merely emphasizes how capital and labour are interrelated.

As a consequence, the best possible periodization of capitalism is not based on its forms (competition, monopoly, market or State capitalism), nor on the changes in the ruling class (private owners, managers, shareholders, etc.), nor on technological phases. These elements only become decisive through what structures them: the pattern of the wage labour relation, the organization of the work process, and all that it entails. When Marx stressed the move from manufacture to big industry, he was suggesting such a periodization (Capital, vol.I, chap. XIV and XV). Another system of production emerged later, "Fordism-Keynesianism", which has been in crisis for thirty years, and has not overcome its crisis yet.

BREAKING AT THE TIGHTEST LINK

Our hypothesis could be summed up like this. Communist revolution can only succeed as a fight not just against the misery imposed by capitalism, but also against the riches it offers.

Communist revolution is the moment when the critiques of poverty and of riches are fused into one through the critique of the enriched deprivation offered to us. Only by getting rid of the riches that are now proposed or promised to a minority of human beings, shall we put an end to the all-too-real abject poverty that is the fate of the majority.

Therefore, revolution can only become a practical issue in a context of capital overflow, as opposed to a shortage of capital. Neither full economic boom nor slump and utter poverty are favourable to a radical critique, which is most likely to emerge when capitalist prosperity reaches its highest point and becomes fragile.

A permanent feature of revolutionary thinking is to look for the weakest link, and to hope for a decisive crisis caused by the inability of the bourgeois to keep their economic machine running. Revolutionaries often wait for (and try to contribute to) the breakdown moment

when capital will prove unable to maintain its own system, and basically to provide wage labour with work.

Historical evidence points to the opposite. When unemployment and misery prevail, the Number One problem is how to avoid them. Intense and violent class struggle can erupt out of that situation, but hardly ever communist struggle.

The revolutionary wave that followed 1914-18 was countered all the more as it was above all a reaction to the war slaughter and the impoverishment that went with it. The return to peace and reforms (such as the 8 hour-day, in principle at least) brought a - provisional - end to the massacres, and improved living conditions. Then the classes kept on fighting without either of them imposing its solution. The protracted yet indecisive conflict that went on throughout the 20s and 30s is the main factor behind capital's incomplete reforms, and its inability and unwillingness to opt for such changes as those put forward by men like Taylor, Ford and Keynes.

The 1929 crash and its mismanagement were among the most visible signs of social deadlock. Profits may have been high in the US in the 1920s, but in a context that did not allow them to contribute to an enlarged accumulation. There was a discrepancy between an

emerging system of production (with its growing emphasis on consumer goods) and a treatment of labour which denied it both sufficient purchasing power (Ford's "good" pay remained the exception) and any say in the running of society (nearly all bosses, Ford included, were union bashers). Industrial profits were thus diverted to speculation. For a few years after 1929, the bourgeois stuck to this narrow class attitude, lowering wages, restricting credit, bringing down production and consumption.

Even pressed by competition, capitalists aren't dedicated modernizers. Modernizing entails sacrifices on the part of the bourgeois too. When the initiative and pressure stop coming from the proletarians, the owners of capital are prone to conservatism. Successful innovators usually have to rebel against the vested interest of their own class.

Keynesianism and Fordism hardly existed socially before the New Deal. The Roosevelt administration was resisted by the majority of businessmen, who believed that a long queue of unemployed at the factory gates was the best safeguard of their profits. Ford could impose the 5 $ day in his own plants, but not extend it to other companies. Such schemes only became historical forces as an answer

to the Depression, and with the help of 1939-45 and the reconstruction that followed.

It took the shock of a world war to implement the new class compromise, and in Europe to crush by force the social blockage that the local bourgeoisie had maintained since the 20s. In Germany, especially, Nazism had organized social conservation in the form of dictatorship, extreme racism and military expansionism: but modern capital can't be technically advanced and socially reactionary. These fetters had to be broken.

The post-war era owed its dynamics to the unfolding of class struggle: its impetus around 1917-21, its defeat and yet subsequent resilience, then its complete crushing in 1939-45. Only in a later period, when capital was flying high and at the same time encountering trouble caused by the first disappointments in the class compromise, only then could the communist question be asked (albeit, by a minority) in the 60s-70s: critique of work, of the commodity, of the State.

Needless to say, we have no strategy whatsoever. Simply, instead of looking for the weak point, we suggest considering communist revolution possible at the strongest or highest point of a development cycle. A social system of production starts becoming fragile when

it reaches full maturity. It's then that the equilibrium between the conditions of social productivity is the best, but also the most delicate to maintain, because both confronting classes expect the most from it. The social compromise is strained, like a spring that works at its best when it's overtaut, but then risks breaking up. The system has never been so stable, but its weaknesses are coming out, as those of Taylorism and Fordism did in the mi-60s.

Such a maturation implied a proletariat and a bourgeoisie that were both active.

Are they now?

LOCKED INTO RESTLESSNESS

We're not dismissing the extent of recent and present class struggles. Lack of space prevents us from going here into details about such examples as the implosion of Argentina (2001-2002), the Brazilian landless peasants, the lorrydrivers' strike in France (2002), the Palestinian dead-end, the anti-war actions against US and British invasion of Iraq, which the French version of this text tries to explore. Argentinian road blocks (also present in other South American countries), for instance, are a new form of struggle, as important in their own way as

political mass strikes in Europe a century ago, organizing on a territorial level, fusing meeting and acting in the same social space. Quite a few piqueteros refused to be defined as "workers", "unemployed", "housewives" or any fixed category. Yet in spite of their vitality they were making relatively modest demands. The movement was strong and yet limited in its objectives. This contradiction ultimately destroyed its autonomy. A social wave that first included middle class people smashing bank windows, ebbed when the proles rallied middle class politics. Inventiveness and autonomous activity finally produced barter, workers' management and local self-help. The proletarians realized what they were rejecting, not what what they could have done.

It seems that nearly all conflicts (another example would be the uprisings in Kabylia) are now more extensive than deep. Confrontation does not push any class to seriously alter its mode of existence. The bourgeois hardly try to modify the conditions of value creation: they mainly try to exploit labour more without remodeling the whole social process as Fordism did. As for the workers, they do fight casualization and layoffs, but they can't prevent nor solve anything. Wage labour is capable of aggravating the crisis of capital, not of forcing it to reform itself, let alone of proposing anything else. Neither contender attempts

to shift the conditions and terrain of the antagonism. Appearances notwithstanding, proletarians and bourgeois are now acting like conservative reformers, keen on preserving (or trying to preserve) what they've got. Both classes play a zero-sum game.

Such social behaviour is typical of a phase of uneasy maturation, and reflected in the current stalemate of radical reformism. Numerous demos, millions of supporters and a myriad of counter-information networks have so far proved unable to give themselves any political clout and parliamentary existence, as if people did not believe it possible to think and act on a total scale. "Think global, act local" actually reduces globality to a sum of localities. In the 60s, demonstrators rejected party politics in the name of an altogether different perspective. Now they hope to reach totality by piling up thousands of local actions. There lies indeed the strength and their shortcoming. This addition of partialities is able to mobilize huge crowds against social evils because it does not target them in the middle, only on the sides. It does not ask for the suppression of speculation, only for adequate taxation of speculators; nor for an entirely new agriculture, only for non-GM products; nor for an end to nuclear power stations, only for more wind farms; etc. This accounts for its wide

popular appeal, but hardly builds up a programme for government.

As in the 1920s and 30s, the impotence of reform results in social deadlock.

Although capitalism never operates in harmony, it requires some confrontational balance between labour and capital, workers and the organization of work, competition and monopoly, State and private sector, industry and finance, "invisible hand" regulation and State regulation, offshore and onshore, long and short terms, etc. These equilibriums are now tending to break up. Over-financialisation weighs down on productive investment, and politics too often pursues its own interest at the expense of the whole system. Capital does not get the enlarged accumulation basis it needs. Labour neither gets the recognition nor the space it needs to breathe and do more than just forcefully submit to capital. The world is beginning to look like a less and less manageable combination of voids.

This worldwide class struggle that's both agitated and at a standstill is the "global" background (and real cause) of the failure of the capitalist phase set in motion about twenty years ago, of which the "New Economy" was the most hyped novelty.

A NEGATIVE SUCCESS

Although a lot has obviously changed since 1980, the new technological and social cycle is far from fulfilling the great expectations that it was born with. Its ambitions were to get rid of whatever stood in the way of the free flow of capital (union power, workers' restrictive practices, excessive State control, national borders, etc.), to help the economy regulate itself, and to do away with utopias, particularly socialism and communism.

Two decades later, by and large, the negative side of this programme has been completed, but what was heralded as an era of long prosperity (for a sizeable minority at least) lasted no more than ten years. A handful of very rich are still getting richer, but the Western middle classes are finding it harder to reproduce their social privileges. Ultra-liberalism seems as outdated as textbook Marxism. Real policy mixes de-regulation and intervention. In the US, a determined rightwing government goes into "military Keynesianism", and pours billions into aerospace, steel, agriculture, transport, etc. Britain brings back the railway lines under government supervision (and funding). Berlusconi contemplated having a 20% State shareholding of FIAT. These practices, however, are essentially piecemeal makeshift measures.

Instead of fitting into a global plan, they compensate for the deficiencies of liberalism.

Capitalism has been highly successful in spreading a consumer model: in Tunis as in Manilla, people drink Coke, watch videos and dream of driving a car, but that essentiel aspect is not the whole picture.

The obsession for short term profit is a sign of a lack of profits. Excess financiarization, megamergers, mass redundancies and the increasing burden of debt, derive from an essential cause: labour is probably more productive than it was in the 1970s, but the productivity of capital as a whole remains insufficient. The bourgeois may have deluded themselves by waging a systematic and usually successful offensive against the workers by killing costs at all costs, but cost/benefit ratios are still too low. Despite the high profitability of some companies, the majority of firms aren't profitable. This is why so many top managers prey on their own companies. Enron is a sign of crisis, not of buoyant entrepreneurship.

THE MANHATTAN-BAGDHAD RUNAWAY

We won't deny the validity of quite a few radical interpretations of the US-British war against Iraq and of today's imperialism in general. Their only flaw is to fail to situate the relevant points they make within the overall framework of present world class conflict, however difficult the task may be. Only a general context explains the (apparent) triumph of the US army and the (real) incoherences of US ventures. Why is Uncle Sam doing too much (targeting a minor enemy as if it were a major one) and too little (really occupying Iraq would require more soldiers than the 130.000 now posted in that country)?

"(..) why do the rulers seem to need extreme measures to solve ordinary problems ?" (Against Sleep and Nightmare, n.7, 2003)

Oil is less what caused the war than one of its pretexts and results. There were other (and ultimately safer) ways of securing natural resources than invading Iraq. We would argue rather that the oil lobby destabilizes American decision-taking. Those backward bourgeois factions that lead the Bush administration conceive of foreign policy as a mere power struggle, and have a neo-

colonial view of world domination: to further their interests, they can think of nothing better than to take over the oil fields, like Nazi Germany laying hands on Russian corn-fields and coal mines.

The sociology of the elite does not explain everything. The question is why some bourgeois (the oilmen, in this case) get the upper hand over the general interests of their class. Just like the imbalance between productive and finance capital, the autonomization of the political and military spheres reveals instability. A dynamic capitalism does not let a particular structure or institution (big business, State bureaucracy, the banks, the army...) prevail at the expense of the others. No imperialism rules peacefully, but excessive reliance on the big guns is a symptom of weakness. In the forty-odd years that followed WW II, the US often intervened successfully (Guatemala: 1954; Chile: 1973), sometimes not (Bay of Pigs: 1961; Indochina: 1975), but usually to further its deepest interests. Playing supercop now aggravates the ills it is supposed to cure. Sending troops to Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan has not promoted any development that would benefit American (or European, or Japanese) capitalism. GIs manage disorder in Kabul as much as businessmen in Cleveland make do with declining assets.

The growing autonomy of the military shows a loss of totality, and the inability of the ruling class to discipline itself and set objectives serving its general interests.

Of course, the US army won't be bogged down in the Iraqi sands as it was in the Vietnam jungles and highlands. America let itself get involved in Indochina when a triumphant system of production was gaining momentum. But this out of time, out of place conflict (rightly described by the situationists in 1967 as a local war) did not weigh heavily on what was then a positive capitalist phase. Afterwards, imperialism managed to withdraw from the Indochina quagmire. Nowadays, the Bush government does its best to get involved in clashes devoid of any real geopolitical stake, and the sole objective of which is to affirm US hegemony. Might no longer has any other purpose than itself.

TECHNOLOGICAL FANTASM

Just as robots and computers were supposed to relieve capital of the burden of labour, smart bombs and unmanned planes are supposed to win the battles of tomorrow. Few experts realize that the so-called "Revolution in Military Affairs" is only invincible as long as the armed forces that use it are stronger from the

start than their opponent. In other words, robocopped GIs would always win because they'd always be fighting "underdeveloped" enemies....

This fallacy also relies on the illusion of total command. Modern technology is said to be able to control labour unrest by re-arranging the work process, to control living beings through genetic manipulation, to control geopolitical threats by intelligent munitions, and above all to know everything that's going on everywhere thanks to a complete mastery of telecommunication and satellite information.

While they picture themselves as pixel dancers, the managers of capital forget that the props behind the stage weigh millions of tons, and are as vulnerable as any machinery. No doubt secret service agents could read this text before it reached its readers (assuming that they so wished to), but not without brick and mortar buildings, personnel, hardware and lots of money. Like the industrial machine, State and war machinery is based on huge investments that cost so much that they often fail to bring in rich political dividends. Technological escapism is not the solution, only part of the problem.

HEGEMONY WITHOUT LEADERSHIP

The real USA predicament is not imperial overstretch, but the gap between military overpower and unstable social relations. Of course North America is not about to collapse, but its inner social compromise is not yet consolidated, and therefore can't be exported even to the rich regions of the world.

In 1945, US occupying forces in Germany were not concerned with water or power cuts, nor with the shortage of medical supplies for the local people. They brought along with them historical prospects that later helped restore and improve public services. The Germans took up the American way of life (and ideology), because that way of life was coherent with what they were experiencing, because Fordism and democracy meant something in Frankfurt and Hamburg after the fall of Nazism. This is clearly not happening in Basra today. So what is it that the US is doing in Iraq in 2003? From the point of view of US corporate interests, there's no point in being in Iraq unless it helps in having a say in the oil flow. Then how can the US army contribute to that if it fails to restore order, or if the order it maintains eventually proves no more favourable than former Baathist rule?

Acting as if one was trying today to extend to the whole world a Western way of life that could be extended to Japan and Europe in 1950, is tantamount to shattering the socio-political stability of whole areas.

The question is why the political and military establishment sometimes resorts to brinkmanship. When McArthur wanted to attack China in 1951, the army firmly rejected his plan as "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time and with the wrong enemy". US present gung-ho gestures derive from a blocked class situation which results in a superpower achieving world hegemony without playing an effective leadership role.

Fifty years ago, in spite of Russian rule over half of Europe and of the "loss" of China, the US was the leader of the world: it did come with historical perspectives. In 2003, the USSR is dead, and no-one is able to dispute the hegemony of a country that does not give the world a lead.

VERTIGO

September 11, as it is usually called, was the chicken coming home to roost. The "money + technology" attempt to re-make the world was bouncing back on the sorcerer's apprentice. It wasn't just two large skyscrapers

that collapsed but a number of fallacies: the alleged superiority of the immateriality (computer-induced knowledge-created wealth) over down-to-earth industrial manufacturing; the superseding of nature through biogenetic fantasy; the reshaping of the human condition through maximum artificiality; last but not least, the vain quest to do away with the cumbersome proletarians through the "value without labour" dream.

The destruction of the Twin Towers was less an act of war than a prophet's doomsday call. But America's rulers wouldn't listen. They've ignored the warning and treated the event as another Pearl Harbor. Since 2001, capitalism has not reacted by trying to correct its path, but by wanting more of the same. Either it's stalling, or it's rushing on headlong. Military venture, however, will never make up for social incompleteness. No Iraqi crisis will solve the American crisis.

New York City is now planning to replace its ruined monoliths by the tallest buildings in the world (over 500 meters). Such delusions of grandeur signify a society that refuses to take up the profound challenge met in September 2001. Countering a highly symbolic act of violence by an overpowering show of military strength won't do it either.

America is still capitalism's frontline and leading edge. Through those men and women that sit in the Oval Room, it's the world's ruling classes as a whole that are chasing surrogate enemies.

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT ISN'T

So the sledgehammer crushed the (near dead) Baathist fly. This war is frequently interpreted as another proof of a definitively modern capitalist system that is going beyond archaisms: borders, war as distinct from peace, large armies, nation States, rent as opposed to profit, etc. To us, on the contrary, the US-British invasion confirms the existence and resilience of such structures, and the inability of present capitalism to reform them. In a nutshell:

* Capital does not float above ground. Landscape is not cyberspace. In Iraq as elsewhere, value production, inasmuch as it happens, takes place within a geographical framework demarcated by frontiers. Capitalism surely dreams of reducing everything to time, but it only acts in space. The utopia of capital differs from its reality. Globalization does not mean less but more States. A born-again Iraq will only make sense if it re-arranges some coexistence between Kurds, Shiites and

Sunni Arabs within recognized borders, however limited the economic and political autonomy of such a "nation" might be.

* No-one wages war without soldiers (200.000-plus on the field to defeat a much weakened regional power). Actually, the US Army is short of men.

* In spite of the privatization of parts of the US army, it's not mercenaries on the payroll of big business that did the fighting, but State troops.

* The economy rules the world, but there's more to the world than the economy. Politics still exists, and it isn't a smokescreen behind which big business is pulling the strings. Our planet remains organized in a system of States. Revolutionaries would be unwise to believe that from now on wars will be just large police force operations. This would be mistaking the present situation for a definitive one, and current US hegemony for an everlasting one. The Pentagon may be planning an "anti-chaos" army of bomber drones and Special Forces, but it's also preparing for conflicts against mighty rivals. Washington handles Moscow carefully, because Russia is still the second world nuclear power. For soldiers to act merely as international supercops, it would take one single State permanently dominating the Earth, with

socio-political contradictions only at the periphery of the richest countries. In other words, this would mean that neither the European Union, Russia, China, nor any new comer would embark on an armed rivalry against its contestants. It would mean the end of competition, which pushes companies forward, and the end of the State as a projection of military might. Such a world does not exist. Of course, it is impossible today to forecast what future "camps" could be opposed in conflicts that will be as different from 1939-45 as WW II differed from 1914-18 or 1870. Who would have imagined in 1900 that Japan was about to defeat Russia and would one day vie for the Pacific with both Britain and the US? We're not saying that in 2030 China will follow in the footsteps of Japan in 1940. Yet we know that major wars will oppose major capitalist countries.

* Far from re-integrating oil rent in the circulation of profit, the US occupation of Iraq replaces the Baathist State rentiers by monopolies which also hinder optimal profit flow. Globalization is not synonymous with fluidization. The last fifteen or twenty years have seen a resurgence of monopoly rent through giant mergers that often fail to increase value but create windfall profits. Thanks to the (in)famous shareholders' governance, finance has been taking advantage of its intermediary

role to live off productive capital, and it has been setting the whole valorization cycle off balance. Let's also bear in mind the huge sums levied by the various powers that be (central, local, mafia-like) in the ex-State capitalist countries. Capital certainly moves faster than in 1970, but its ultimate profitability is doubtful.

* We also doubt the ability of such wars to further economic growth. The fall of the Saddam regime reveals how superficial and vulnerable the roots of capitalism are in a country like Iraq, where the penetration of wage labour depends so much on a strong State. If State guidance and coercion crumble, the hold of industrial capital and wage labour loses ground (we're not talking about merchant capital). From Cromwell to Bismark, the advent of the Western bourgeoisie relied on central political power to force society into a new mould. Capital does not thrive just on the dynamism of its entrepreneurs. Without the social re-arrangements engineered by one of the last Stalinist regimes, without for instance the creation of special economy zones, the Chinese diaspora would never have promoted the present growth on the mainland.

In other words, either the US imposes an old-style protectorate over Iraq, like France exploiting the riches of Vietnam in colonial times. Or it supports a strong

central Iraqi power, with the risk of furthering nationalism, or of setting the country on fire. Between these two options, the US is unable to decide. Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan point to a sort of internationalized neo-colonialism, which promotes little fluidization. Ethnic consolidation is rarely favourable to capital circulation.

In 1914-18 and 1939-45, America took advantage of wars in Europe and Asia to extend their domination, and at the same time the most advanced form of capitalist social relationship. Now it invents a world war instead of mastering its own contradictions.

The European (and Japanese) ruling classes are as reluctant as the US bourgeoisie to address such problems. We'd like to end this essay on the subject of pensions.

END OF THE "END OF WORK"

The new pension schemes that are being implemented in all industrial countries show once and for all the persisting centrality of work. Far from being an outmoded remnant of the past, devoid of economic meaning and only maintained as a means of social control, work remains the heart of this world. It is

conceivable to allocate resources for a youngster to study until he's 20 or 25, providing these formative years make him employable on the labour market. It is unthinkable to pay for a wage earner to do nothing productive during the last third of his life. "Senior citizens" are most welcome to enjoy the fruits of consumer society if they can afford it, i.e. if they've earned and saved before retirement. Work remains a social norm in reality as in ideology. It is still the great socializer. Other powerful socializers, first of all the family, have to join the world of work some way or other. Without a breadwinner able to support it, the family falls to pieces.

"Old age pensions" as well as "holidays" remind us that we live in a society based on the accumulation of value through productive work. Defining "productive" by what increases money inevitably downgrades housework, and turns old age into inactivity. Leisure is outside work, and the essence of work is its separation from the rest of our life.

Until recently, however, technical progress was regarded as liberation, and an increased life expectancy as proof of the superiority of industrial and market society. (The decrease in life expectancy in the ex-USSR is interpreted as a sign of the failure of "socialism"). In the 'rich"

countries, it was assumed, first implicitly, later in a more and more institutionalized way, that labour would submit to capital in exchange for more non-work time devoted to more and more consumption. The Victorian industrialist, the Fordist boss, the Stalinist bureaucrat and the virtual manager all promised (distant or close) days of freedom and abundance.

Alas, productivity growth and medical wonders are turning back against the wage earner. He is once more called upon to sacrifice himself, this time not to reap the fruits of progress in the future, but merely to compensate right now for a major inconvenience: modern man lives too long. What machines (old-fashioned lathes or computers) and labour-saving and time-saving miracles were supposed to provide, is now forbidden by demography. "Generous" pensions were only possible when a majority of OAPs died early enough to enable the minority to get their money.

All responsible parties (i.e. parties with some prospect of being in government one day) agree on this: so-called free (post-work) time won't be free anymore, because it costs too much. In a not too remote past, the left would have called for more taxes on capital gains in order to solve the problem. No socialist party is now able or

willing to come forward with a platform supporting (even verbally) wages against profits.

FAREWELL TO REFORMERS

Whereas another labour-capital relation is needed, the bourgeoisie opts for a frontal assault: "You will work more, and you will be paid less". Labour is bluntly treated as a mere cost to be reduced at all costs.

Ten years ago, it was fashionable to debate about work sharing, the development of a third sector (neither public nor private), a mutual aid economy, community projects on a large scale, partly voluntary and unpaid, which would be made both necessary and possible by the parallel growth of computerization and unemployment. Thinkers as different as J.Rifkin in America and A.Gorz in France wondered what to do with that vast time span liberated by technical advances. This was also the time when the academic-industrial complex ranted about the end of the assembly line, the autonomy of the work team and workers' empowerment.

Such themes are still making the news, albeit with a big difference. No-one seriously believes that these schemes could bring about more than marginal changes. Nobody taking part in community work hopes that it could one

day tip the scales in favour of a non-market economy. The dream is over. Current radical reformism does not ask for the promotion of a third sector, just for the restoration of the public one. It longs for a return to Keynes, while the bourgeoisie forgets one of the key lessons of Keynesianism: neither a firm nor society can be run against labour.

We're witnessing a (provisional, perhaps) loss of historical mission on the part of the bourgeoisie. The ruling classes act as if they were abandoning the majority of the population to its fate. Though their domination is not questioned, they are only left with a de facto legitimacy. They're there, they occupy the social terrain, but reproducing the labour force is no longer one of their prime objectives. Capitalism, however, is viable only if it carries along (at least in its heartland) a large part of the proletarians, if it maintains them in order to be valorized by them. In every past transitional period, the bourgeois proved able to put forward a universal perspective, and to pass off as the defenders of general interest. Today's common wisdom renounces collective visions, and asks each worker individually to care for himself, to save for his pension and the old age of his partner. Society breaks down into families.

DEFEAT AND.... ?

It's in Italy (2001-2002) and France (2003) that the struggles against pension cuts have been most militant, and yet they resulted in failures, i.e. ended in compromises grossly unfavourable to labour.

No need to be workerist or factory-ist to realize that millions of demonstrators could not offset the massive defeats that have been taking place on shopfloors and in offices for about twenty years. Not everything depends on what happens in the workplace. But when nearly everything that happens in the workplace turns out to be against the workers (as is still the case), this is bound to affect what goes on in the street.

We are faced with a paradox. Seattle, Genoa, demos, riots, meetings, debates, networks, social forums and centres, etc.: there's something clearly positive in the new militancy that has sprung up in the last ten years, however uncritical its critique of capitalism usually is. Our purpose here is not to argue against its obvious massively reformist perspectives. What we'd like to stress is the coexistence of such a wide movement, with the continuing series of worker defeats which this movement is utterly unable to prevent. In fact, it's like

both were running on separate lines, even to the point of often ignoring each other.

Class difference (or indifference) is far from explaining it all. True, the anti-globalizers are mainly middle class, but so were most leftists in the 60s-70s, which did not prevent interplay between blue collar workers and middle class students. Actually, the anti-globalization movement is equally unable (or unwilling) to have an influence in the workplace, and to affect real politics, to influence parties or governments. Its manifold activity takes place in a vacuum with hardly any social impact. Reform remains on the level of words and intentions. As for revolutionary critique, well....

We're not pretending nothing is (nor will be) going on. Nor that the proletarians have to experience serious setbacks before rising again. Defeat has been the reality of proletarian life for twenty years anyway, and still is. We don't know (and nobody knows) how a new social cycle could reach full maturity and breaking-up point. This maturing won't just emerge out of a succession of workers' defeats, like a baby is born after nine months. This is history we're talking about, not biology. Unlike birth or death of living beings, a social reorganization does not come about just when it's "necessary", but also

when human groups find the impetus to achieve it. We're not there yet.

It took harsh protracted struggles, and the demand for something different (in particular, the resistance to absolute surplus-value, and the 8-hour-day claim) for Fordism to come about. At the beginning of the XXIst century, labour is not yet insisting on demands of its own, and is still reacting to the encroachments of capital. Capitalism (i.e. the coexistence and conflict of its two basic classes) has not yet created the categories of proletarians that would be the bearers of such demands. These categories may exist sociologically, but not as agents of social change. The unskilled "mass workers" were not born in 1960, but it took decades for them to appear as a force that challenged the bourgeoisie. New service sector groups supposed to be central to capital's new cycle stand in fact at the centre of something that has so far proved unable to reset the economy on a profit-making course. Computerization and information technologies have not reorganized value production as Taylor, Ford and Keynes did. Call centre workers, for example, are in no position to take on their bosses as car workers did forty years ago.

THE MISTAKE WAS IN THE QUESTION

We're well aware that our standpoint runs counter to the usual revolutionary hope of a proletarian response brought about by the attack of capital, and of a response that would be as severe and far-rearching as the attack. In plain words, the proles would finally rise because (1) they'd be in dire straits, and (2) they'd have nothing to expect from the wage labour system any more (whereas before, they could always go for some reformism or other).

We don't believe in this misery-induced revolution.

Communist revolution is surely not a matter of free will. But it will only come about as the action of social forces more and more conscious of what they're doing and heading into. It couldn't result from people being forced to fight with their backs to the wall.

The idea that "One day there'll be no other alternative" does not apply to history, let alone to revolution. There always is more than one possible option.

Therefore it's pointless to interpret the US war against Iraq, the assault on pensions, or any other event, as additional steps towards an ever more capitalist

capitalism, which would eliminate its minor contradictions and lay the stage bare for the major one: proletariat versus capital.

Capitalism will never solve anything in the place of the proletarians. Our emancipation ultimately depends on us. The negative conditions of revolution aren't enough, nor ever will be.

As is clear from this essay (and a couple of others we've written before), we believe in a certain analysis of the current period. The future might refute it. One of our disagreements with some comrades, is that they never take the risk of being proved wrong. Any theory, particularly one that claims to be revolutionary, is only relevant if it accepts being confronted with (and perhaps contradicted by) facts.

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